

Bush's Border Security Plan Has Unpopular Cuts and Fees

By Tim Starks, CQ Staff

Airline passengers would pay higher ticket fees to help offset spending growth at the Department of Homeland Security under the Bush administration's fiscal 2007 budget request, a trade-off that Congress rejected angrily last year and is poised to rebuff again.

The president also is proposing deep cuts in first-responder programs to help underwrite a proposed 7 percent funding increase for the Homeland department overall. That would support a major boost in border security spending, including enough money to pay for 1,500 new border agents. The department is one of the few slated to receive any funding increase at all.

According to the administration's budget summary, the department's total discretionary budget would grow to \$35.6 billion in fiscal 2007 from \$33.2 billion in fiscal 2006. But much of the increase is predicated on the collection of fees that Congress is unlikely to embrace. Without the fees and collections, the Homeland Department's discretionary budget would rise slightly more than 1 percent to \$30.9 billion.

Doubling the airline passenger security ticket fee to \$5 from \$2.50 for a one-way trip would generate an estimated \$1.3 billion. Lawmakers rejected a similar proposal when they wrote the fiscal 2006 Homeland Security spending bill, arguing that the economically wounded airlines would end up having to shoulder the burden.

Judd Gregg, R-N.H., who chairs the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security, has warned that the security fee proposal would not fare any better this fiscal year, adding it could cost the administration funding for some programs.

But Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff defended the fee proposal, saying that "passengers who benefit from the" Transportation Security Administration "screening process and increased security would bear a fair share of the costs."

Two key border agencies within the department would receive substantial increases. Customs and Border Protection would receive a 14 percent funding jump to \$6.8 billion, while Immigration and Customs Enforcement would receive a 25 percent increase to \$4.2 billion.

The budget includes \$247 million to implement a guest-worker program proposed by Bush that faces an uncertain future in Congress, in which Republicans are deeply divided over immigration strategy.

At the same time, however, state and local homeland security grants that benefit police, firefighters and other first-responders would be slashed by 13 percent to \$2.6 billion, according to the Homeland Security Department briefing material.

Democrats were displeased with many aspects of the Homeland Department budget proposal.

“This budget shortchanges our homeland security efforts by woefully underfunding key programs that provide local communities with the resources to protect our borders, ports, mass transit and critical infrastructure,” said Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, the ranking Democrat on the House Homeland Security Committee. “Likewise, it cuts necessary funding to ensure that our police, firefighters, EMTs and other first-responders positioned on the front lines have what they need to battle terrorism at home.”

Overall funding for terrorism preparedness would fall \$612 million to \$3.4 billion, according to the budget summary.

To receive homeland security grants, states would be required to develop a strategy for interoperability of radio and other communications systems during emergencies.

To enforce the no-fly zone over the nation’s capital the department would create a new permanent National Capital Region Air Defense program. The initiative would be funded at \$61 million. Violations of the no-fly zone have resulted in a number of high-profile incidents that led to evacuations of the Capitol.

Total funding for the Federal Emergency Management Agency for fiscal 2007 would rise to \$3.1 billion from \$2.7 billion, according to the budget summary.

The largest single increase for a high-profile program would go to the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office, which would get \$536 million, a 70 percent bump over funds appropriated for the program for fiscal 2006.